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The Joy of Being Wrong

Luke 13:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

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Christians are people who know they are in need of a savior, and have asked Jesus Christ to be their savior. Christians are people who have joined up with Jesus. Christians are people who, like Peter and his fellow fishermen, have decided to drop their nets and follow the stranger who seems to be able to do things we didn't think we were possible, and who says things that ring true. Christians are people who know they are sick and know they are in need of a physician.

And Christians are those who know the joy, yes the joy, of being wrong. How odd that the world should accuse us of a negative assessment of human nature, of heaping on people the burden of being sinners. In reality, we are free, joyfully free, to have a negative assessment of human nature because we have such an optimistic assessment of God's nature.

Because it is God's nature to forgive, we can confess honestly that it is of our nature to sin. Because God in Christ has set things right between God and us, we can admit that we are wrong.

We're deep in Lent. Does it feel that way to you? I admit I have a hard time being in Lenten contemplation with the sun shining and the trees blooming and the frantic pace of California life. Or was it the frantic pace of being the Father of a three year old? And yet this is the season of the church year in which we are urged to be especially introspective, to honestly examine ourselves, to be reflective.

At our monthly Session meetings, we have been reading and discussing a book called *Healthy Congregations.* This past week we looked at whether or not our congregation is too rigid. The thesis is that all living forms are endangered when they lack flexibility. There is the story of how monkeys are captured in India. A coconut shell is hollowed out and chained to a stake. The shell is filled with rice. An aperture is carved out, just wide enough for a monkey's hand to go through but too narrow for a fist filled with rice to exit. The monkey wants the rice and grabs a handful but can't pull out the hand because the now rice-filled hand is too large to get through the opening in the coconut shell. The monkey is trapped by its own rigidity. The monkey can't understand that 'freedom without rice is more valuable than capture with it.' So, the author suggests, when a *congregation* is trapped by its own resistance to change, we resemble the monkey. The congregation cannot understand that openness to change is more valuable than fear of it.

This is heady stuff. Session broke into small groups to discuss this. Mostly, your elders don't feel that the congregation is like the monkey. But we also realize that healthy churches are ones that keep learning. We looked at one another and said that continuous learning keeps us flexible and adaptive, able to stay with God as he seeks to create a new future for us. If we keep learning, we will (hopefully) see the ground in which we are embedded, and be able to make sensible decisions whether we should do this or that.

So, even in the midst of a frantic time, I found the Spirit moving us to reflection and self-examination. And, you know, I think we Christians don't often appreciate how odd it is for us to gather, and perhaps how odd it is for us to confess our sins when we do gather. That sort of honesty isn't happening everywhere in this town. But, to be a Christian, is to be someone who has instilled the practice of honesty, confession and repentance.

And this is hard. When confronted by my failures, I get defensive. I blame. I make excuses. And, most of the time, people around me are most willing to conspire with me in avoidance of responsibility. I may not be the best person in the world, but at least I'm not as bad as X. So, if we do this kind of rationalizing with each other regularly (and we do), then why should we be so surprised when we ask Johnny, honestly, if he took those cookies from the cookie jar, and Johnny says 'no.' ?? To the extent Johnny is afraid, it's very, very hard to be honest. To the extent I am threatened by real or potential consequences, honesty dries up. Fear usually gets in the way of honesty.

And that is precisely what makes Christian confession different. We don't so much confess in order to be forgiven. We confess because we are forgiven! We're not honest about our sin in order that God will love us. Rather, knowing in Christ that God loves us, we can be honest. That is to say, honest with Jesus, but hopefully, over time, we learn to be honest with each other as well.

We have been told - and hopefully we believe - that nothing, even our sin, can separate us from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8). After all, in just a few weeks, we are going to read the story about how we did our very worst to the Son of God when we hung him on a cross. Yet, even from that cross, he looked down upon us and prayed, 'Father, forgive them.' After his death, we believe he rose from the dead, and came back to us, the people who had betrayed and deserted him. So, our ability to be honest with Jesus is rooted *not in who we are, but in who God has proved himself to be.* We didn't exactly take his word on it. But we did (and do) believe his word when it is associated with action. So our honesty doesn't come out of who we are but out of who God is, and the feeling we have that we can really, deeply, trust him and his love for us.

So, there is great freedom in this honesty we call confession. Not to have to wear masks with Jesus, not to have to act with pretense with Jesus - this is a very great gift indeed. Not to be forced to lie or understate our flaws, our shortcomings, our problems. This is great joy.

And I would take it a step further, and maybe use an illustration that might get me into trouble with some of you. Christians believe that love is the precondition for honesty, but we also believe that honesty is the precondition for change. We are free to change because the first step toward being new people is to be able to admit to who we are. And we start with this: we are not the people God wants us to be. We are not even the people we want to be. We long to be more, to be better. So, the first step is admission of who we have failed to be.

During President Clinton's ethical troubles back in 1999, many of us were involved in what was really an extraordinary national discussion - about the meaning of repentance. President Clinton apologized, said that he was sorry, and asked the American people to forgive him. Isn't this repentance? What more could be asked? The national discussion revealed, among other things, a woeful lack of understanding among Americans about just what a Christian believes when a Christian talks of sin and repentance.

I believe there are four aspects of true repentance that are helpful to remember. You might want to write these down.

(1) *True repentance means there is comprehension that wrong has been done.* The prodigal son comes to himself, comes to his senses, and realizes that he has done wrong in the far country to which he went with his share of his Father's fortune, and he acknowledges that he *has* a Father, and that he *can* come home. Recognition is the first honest step in repentance.

(2) *True repentance involves some movement toward cleansing.* Recognition alone is not repentance. Sackcloth and ashes were the way the Old Testament people demonstrated their recognition. Fasting associated with prayer is often a physical, visible, embodied way of expressing our grief at sin. None of these are necessary for God to forgive, but I believe they are necessary for us to realize the full benefits of our forgiveness. We long to do something, not in order to be forgiven, but because we believe that, in Christ, we are being forgiven.

(3) *True repentance produces a yearning for God.* These initial gestures lead you to the realization that without God, you are lost. We realize we have become distracted in our relationship with God. We therefore *want* to turn, return to God, once again to be rightly related with God. When Zacchaeus responds extravagantly to Jesus' presence in his home (Luke 19:8), it is a visible sign that change, turning around has occurred, and grace has been joyfully received.

(4) *True repentance leads to a changed life.* Repentance is considerably more than a feeling. We must bear fruit that befits repentance.

As I said, we long to be more, to be better. The first step is admission of who we have failed to be. So now, I invite you to a time of silent reflection upon your life, about the promises you have made to God, the ones that you have kept, and the promises you have failed to keep. I ask you to engage in searching examination of your life. Join with the faithful tonight in the Sunday Evening Worship Service, or spend some extra time today and this week in self-reflection. True repentance is possible for all of us.

Let us pray: "O God, your glory is always to have mercy. Be gracious to all who have gone astray from your ways, and bring them again with penitent hearts and steadfast faith to embrace and hold fast the unchangeable truth of your Word, Jesus Christ your Son, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever. (And remember that) The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. May the almighty and merciful Lord grant us remission of all our sins, true repentance, amendment of life, and the grace and consolation of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

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